

HELPING HAND RESTORES DIGNITY TO A DAY OUT

By Pat Carney

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In a holiday season of pleas, pledges and merchant promotions, the best gift of all may be the gift of kindness. It's available all year. And it's free.

A gift of kindness can illuminate our world. Such was the case when I wheeled my sister Norah through the Henri Matisse exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery this fall.

Norah is "in care," that bland euphemism to describe the fact that she can no longer look after herself, nor can her family look after her. Since her stroke several years ago she has been in a "care facility" in Yaletown. She is my little sister, and I am her self-appointed social director, charged with expanding her world beyond the institutional walls that confine her.

This is tricky for both of us. Despite the loss of her short-term memory, Norah is still Norah, with a cheeky personality, an Irish wit and temper. She knows what she wants to do and see.

But as her physical ability declines, from cane to walker and now to a wheelchair, my task is to figure out what she can actually do, given my own arthritis-imposed constraints.

Since the wheelchair became her transport, the White Spot drive-ins are out. So is the golf cart tour of Van Dusen Gardens, a birthday favourite — although I can still manage pushing her wheelchair into the accessible dining room with its view of the garden's floral splendour.

The VAG Matisse show seemed a natural. An accessible building, the gallery is a popular destination for our sibling outings. The exhibit was not too large and on one floor.

As a former art student who studied with some of B.C.'s most famous artists, Norah has held a VAG membership for years.

And as a special treat, I planned on lunching from Vancouver's famous food carts, several of which are positioned around Robson Square.

A HandyDart bus picked us up at Yaletown House. HandyDart drivers transport disabled people to and from their destinations, usually door to door. They are unfailingly pleasant, putting up with abusive passengers, sometimes smelly guide dogs, traffic jams and bumps in the road, collecting canes and walkers, locking and unlocking the wheelchair shackles, never raising their voices or rushing their clients, dealing patiently with lost bus tickets.

And HandyDart clients are usually a chatty group, trading stories and histories. Once a woman on her way to her thrice-weekly dialysis treatment told me her son was a potential kidney donor, but he had a wife and three children. "I don't want to risk his health," she worried. "At least you have the dialysis treatments," I said.

She looked at me with flat eyes: "I would rather be dead," she said.

The Matisse show was a success with Norah. Her brown eyes sparkled as we discussed the artist's use of colour and his portrayal of women subjects, compared to Picasso. I wheeled her back into the foyer, where a volunteer had already checked out the most accessible food carts in Robson Square.

I left Norah with the volunteer and found the purple food cart, ordering a prawn taco and fish taco and returned to collect my sister and wheel her out into the sunshine and lunch.

That was where the problem arose. She loved the crowds — long legged girls in their short skirts, the pigeons and the odd dog — and lifted her face to the sun. But her fish taco lay in her limp hands. She no longer remembered how to lift the finger food to her mouth.

Shocked, I stuffed my prawn taco into my mouth and, leaning down, tried to spoon the fish into my sister's mouth, like a bird feeding its chick. Some fish went into her open mouth but taco sauce smeared her face, taco crumbs and fish flakes fell on her clothes, her shoes, the creases in her wheelchair, the sidewalk.

Worried that we would miss the HandyDart pickup, I placed the crumbled taco in her lap and wheeled her back through the VAG to the entrance, braked the wheelchair and resumed my untidy feeding attempts.

Norah is usually a picky eater. But as she licked her lips she made it clear she was going to eat every last crumb of taco, or whatever wasn't spilling all over her clothes and chair. I had my hands full feeding her and unable to tidy her. It was mutually mortifying.

A man approached us with a container of wipes and a garbage bag. "May I help?" he asked. I looked at him, elbowing my purse closer to my body as I held the fork and remains of the taco in my hands. "Who are you?" I demanded bluntly. "I am from the gallery," he replied.

Kneeling down on the cement sidewalk, he gently wiped my sister's smeared face, cleaned her long, listless fingers, and carefully removed the crumbs and flakes from her clothes and shoes. He dug out chunks of fish from her wheelchair. He left the sidewalk crumbs to some delighted pigeons.

By the time HandyDart pulled up to the gallery, Norah was her usual fastidious self. As the driver pushed Norah's wheelchair to the bus, the volunteer disappeared through the gallery door. I realized I had never even found out his name.

So now food carts are off the list. But the kindness of a stranger who restored my sister's dignity and composure will give us both the confidence to explore new adventures in the future.

That is a gift beyond value, and for all seasons.

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